

Montgomery County Council, school board spar over education spending

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Montgomery County school officials, pointing to growing enrollment and a less affluent student body, said Tuesday it will cost even more next year to run one of the nation's largest school systems.

But County Council members, responsible for funding the schools, counter that more money is out of the question -- setting up a potentially volatile clash that could make the recent scrounging for education dollars look easy by comparison, county officials say.

Throw in a looming teacher pension crisis -- state lawmakers in coming months will consider giving more of the cost to localities -- and Montgomery could be on the hook for millions more than the state-required standard it was unable to pay this year.

Some officials contend that the only solution is to rein in employees' salaries and benefit packages, which account for 80 cents of every dollar in the county's \$4.3 billion budget.

"We all know what is at stake," said Councilwoman Valerie Ervin, D-Silver Spring, during the joint meeting with Montgomery's school board. "It's compensation and benefits. We don't have any other places to cut."

Montgomery County Public Schools' operating budget has grown by more than 75 percent in the last decade, soaring past that of other county agencies. And more than 2,620 public school employees earn more than \$100,000 a year.

Funding for schools makes up 57 percent of the county operating budget, higher than at any point in the last decade.

On slashing salaries or instituting layoffs, outgoing Schools Superintendent Jerry Weast told *The Washington Examiner*, "I'm going to leave that to the political bodies. There is no perfect solution when you have increasing costs, an increasing amount of children and less money to work with."

County schools opened recently to about 144,000 students, 2,300 more than last fall.

The surge led to an additional student in each classroom this year, and enrollment is expected to grow for the next decade, Weast said.

Council members and school officials agree, however, that questions far outnumber answers at this point.

"I don't know what the solution will look like," said school board Vice President Chris Barclay. "But if we stop doing some of these things, it's doomsday -- there is no going back."